

A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.

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CHAPTER 7

The Buddhism of King Aśoka

The Edicts

THE BUDDHISM of King Aśoka is presented here in conjunction with Early Buddhism, since Aśoka's ideas are closer to Early Buddhism than to Nikāya Buddhism. The dates of King Aśoka's reign, usually given as 268–232 B.C.E., are based on Rock Edict XIII, which listed the names of five kings to the west of India to whom King Aśoka sent missionaries to spread Buddhism. Included were the kings of Syria, Egypt, and Macedonia. The dates of King Aśoka's reign, with a possible error of two to ten years, were calculated by comparing the dates of these five kings. Because Indians had little interest in history, we have few Indian historical records; these dates provide a benchmark upon which many other dates of ancient Indian history are based. According to the Sri Lankan historical chronicle the *Mahāvamsa* (chap. 20, v. 6), Aśoka reigned for thirty-seven years; according to the *Purāṇas*, he ruled for thirty-six years. The inscriptions that survive from Aśoka's reign provide the most reliable source for discussing his times. Besides the edicts, Sri Lankan sources such as the *Mahāvamsa*, *Dīpavāṃsa*, and *Samantapāsādikā* should also be consulted. The Northern tradition includes such sources as the *A-yü-wang chuan* (*T 2042, Aśokarājāvadāna**), the *A-yü-wang ching* (*T 2043, Aśokarājasūtra?*), and the *Divyāvadāna*.

According to legendary biographies, Aśoka led a violent life as a youth and was responsible for the deaths of many people. Later, however, he converted to Buddhism and ruled benevolently. Consequently, he was called Dharmāśoka (Aśoka of the Teaching). Aśoka's edicts are a

more reliable source for information about his life. They state that Aśoka converted to Buddhism and became a Buddhist layman in the seventh year of his reign, but was not particularly pious for the following two and one-half years. In the eighth year of his reign he conquered the country of Kaliṅga after a campaign in which he saw many innocent people killed. Prisoners were deported to other lands, children were separated from parents, and husbands from wives. The king was greatly saddened by these scenes and came to believe that war was wrong, that the only real victory was one based on the truths of Buddhist teachings (*dharma-vijaya*), not one based on force and violence.

For more than a year, Aśoka lived near a Buddhist order and performed religious austerities. In the tenth year of his reign, he "went to *sambodhi*" (Rock Edict VIII). The term "*sambodhi*" means enlightenment and can be interpreted as meaning either that the king was enlightened or that he journeyed to Buddhagayā, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. From that time on, Aśoka embarked on a series of pilgrimages to sites connected with the Buddha's life. According to one edict, some time after the twentieth year of his reign, he visited Lumbinī, the site of the Buddha's birth (Rummindei Pillar Edict). Aśoka assiduously practiced his religion and strove to establish and extend the Dharma in the lands he ruled or influenced. Under his reign, the people were taught with pictures depicting heavenly palaces. Thus, according to the inscriptions, the people who formerly had no relations with the gods now had such relations (Brahmagiri Rock Edict).

From the twelfth year of his reign until the twenty-seventh year, King Aśoka worked to spread Buddhist teachings as he understood them by having stone inscriptions carved. Many of these have been discovered. Some, carved on polished stone slabs, are known as Rock Edicts, while others, carved on large sandstone pillars, are called Pillar Edicts. There are two types of Rock Edicts. Fourteen Major Rock Edicts have been discovered at seven places along the borders of the territory that Aśoka controlled, including Girnār. They generally have long texts and are the most representative of the edicts. Minor Rock Edicts have been discovered at seven places in central and southern India. These edicts generally concern Buddhism, but some concern Aśoka's practices. The inscription concerning the seven *sūtras* that Aśoka recommended (see below) was found at Bairāt, one of the sites of the Minor Rock Edicts.

Both Major and Minor Pillar Edicts have survived. Six or seven Major Pillar Edicts have been discovered at six sites, primarily in central India. Like the Rock Edicts, they generally concern the content of the Dharma. They were erected after the twenty-sixth year of Aśoka's reign. The Minor Pillar Edicts were usually situated at Buddhist pil-

grimage sites such as Sārnāth and Sāñcī. The subjects covered by them concern the Buddhist order (*sangha*) and include warnings against schisms. These pillars were generally capped with carvings of animals. The pillar discovered at Sārnāth is capped by four lions facing outward. Beneath them are four wheels of the teaching. This exquisite carving has been adopted as a national symbol, appearing on modern India's seal; the wheel appears on its flag.

Aśoka's inscriptions were first discovered by modern scholars in the nineteenth century. These discoveries have continued in recent years. In 1949 an inscription in Aramaic was discovered at Lampāka in Afghanistan. An inscription written in both Greek and Aramaic was found at Kandahār in 1958, and the discovery of a Rock Edict within the city limits of Delhi was reported in 1966. More than thirty edicts have been identified. Although great progress has been made in understanding the inscriptions since the first one was deciphered in 1873 by James Prinsep, many unsolved problems concerning the inscriptions remain.

The Dharma Preached by King Aśoka

The king believed the Buddhist teaching that all men were essentially equal. Hence, all men, including himself, were to observe the Buddha's Teaching (Dharma). People were to follow a moral code of compassion and sincerity. Among the recommended activities were having compassion for living beings, speaking the truth, acting with forbearance and patience, and helping the needy. Although these prescriptions are simple, Aśoka believed that they were immutable truths that all should follow. To transmit them to future generations, he had his edicts carved in stone.

The importance of respect for the lives of sentient beings was repeatedly stated in Aśoka's edicts. Needless killing was prohibited. If animals were to be killed, pregnant and nursing animals were to be spared. Two types of hospitals were built in the country, one for animals and one for people. Medicinal plants were cultivated, trees planted alongside the roads, and wells dug. Places to rest and obtain drinking water were built for travelers (Rock Edict III). In these ways, Aśoka eased the lives of both men and animals and demonstrated his love and affection (*dayā*) for all sentient beings.

In Aśoka's edicts, the importance of obedience to parents, teachers, and superiors was repeatedly stressed. Elders were to be treated with courtesy. Friends, scholars, brahmans, śramaṇas, poor people, servants,

and slaves were to be treated properly, and the dignity of each person respected. In addition, alms were to be given to brahmans, *śramanas*, and the poor. The king himself gave up the sport of hunting and embarked on Dharma tours (*dharma-yātrā*) around the country (Rock Edict VIII). On these tours, he visited religious authorities and scholars, gave alms, held interviews with the common people, and taught and admonished the people about the Dharma. These Dharma tours were Aśoka's greatest pleasure. For Aśoka, teaching or giving the Dharma (*dharma-dāna*) to others constituted the most excellent form of almsgiving and resulted in friendships based on the Dharma. By preaching the Dharma to others, a person would receive rewards in this life, and countless merits would be produced for his later lives. Along with the emphasis on giving the Dharma to others, Aśoka urged people to consume less and accumulate little, and thus control their desires.

Aśoka was especially diligent in his conduct of government affairs. He ordered that governmental problems be reported to him at any and all times, even when he was eating, in the women's quarters, or in his gardens. For Aśoka, conducting good government was the king's chief responsibility to the people of the country. Benefiting all the beings of the world and then increasing those benefits was the noblest task in the world. All the king's efforts to rule were thus expressions of his desire to repay his debts to other sentient beings. He wished to make people happy in this world and help them attain heaven in their future lives. He considered all sentient beings to be his children (Rock Edict VI).

In the edicts, the Dharma was defined in a variety of ways, as goodness (*sādhu*), few passions (*alpāsrava*), many good acts (*bahukalyāna*), affection (*dayā*), almsgiving (*dāna*), truth (*satya*), and purity of action (*śauca*). The realization of Dharma (*dharma-pratipatti*) was said to consist of affection, generosity in giving, truth, purity, gentleness (*mārdava*), and goodness: if a person engaged in almsgiving, but had not learned to control his senses (*samyama*) or lacked gratitude (*krtajñatā*) or was without steadfast sincerity (*dṛḍhabhaktī*), he was a base person. Aśoka warned that brutality, inhumanity, anger, pride, and jealousy all led to even more defilements. "Good is not easy to accomplish. Anyone just beginning to do good will find it difficult," he stated. But then Aśoka noted that he had "accomplished many good deeds" (Rock Edicts IV-V).

Aśoka spread his views on the Dharma in two ways, through regulations concerning the Dharma (*dharma-niyama*) and quiet contemplation of the Dharma (*dharma-nidhyāti*). Regulations concerning the Dharma were promulgated by the king. These laws were directed in particular

against killing. Thus, through the force of law the people were made to observe Aśoka's views on taking life.

Contemplation of the Dharma involved quieting the mind and meditating on the Dharma. Through such contemplation the people would attain a deeper understanding of the prohibition on taking life and then apply it to their other actions. Quiet contemplation of the Dharma was considered to be superior to regulations enforcing the Dharma (Pillar Edict VII).

Aśoka emphasized the importance of not killing, of valuing all life, and of respecting people. Even a person sentenced to death was given a respite of three days for relatives to appeal or for the condemned to prepare for the next life. By the twenty-sixth year of his reign, Aśoka had already declared amnesties for prisoners twenty-five times (Pillar Edict V). The main teaching of Aśoka's Dharma, respect for life, was based on the realization that other beings were also alive and had feelings. The other virtues stressed by Aśoka—kindness, giving, truthfulness, purity of action, obedience to parents, just treatment of others, gratitude to society—all arose out of that basic realization. The contents of Aśoka's Dharma were rich indeed.

In order that the Dharma might always be practiced throughout the area he ruled, Aśoka appointed ministers of Dharma (*dharma-mahāmātra*) who were to travel throughout the country every five years and ascertain that the Dharma was being preached (Separate Rock Edict I: Dhauri).

Because the longest edict, Rock Edict XIV, does not specifically state that Aśoka's Dharma was derived from Buddhism, some scholars have questioned whether it was Buddhist. However, the Dharma preached by Aśoka was not based upon any non-Buddhist tradition. For example, the term “*dharma*” was discussed in such Hindu *Dharmaśāstra* works as the *Laws of Manu*, where it was used to mean law as in criminal and civil law. The term was also used in Nyāya thought, and both *dharma* and *adharma* were terms in Jaina philosophy. But in each case, the term was used in completely different ways from Aśoka's edicts. The term “*dharma*” was used in Vedic and Upaniṣadic literature with a meaning close but not identical to Aśoka's use. The central idea of the *Upaniṣads*, however, was the identity of Brahman and ātman; the term “*dharma*” did not occupy the central position in Upaniṣadic thought as it did in Aśoka's thought.

In the *Bhagavad-gītā*, *dharma* was an element in the important term “*svadharma*” (one's own duty), which was used in the Karmayoga (Way of Action) system. A variety of moral virtues was listed in the *Bhagavad-*

gītā, many of them identical to those in Aśoka's edicts. However, war was commended in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, whereas Aśoka disapproved of it.

In contrast to non-Buddhist religion, the term "Dharma" occupied a central place in Buddhist thought. It is one of the Three Jewels (*triratna*): the Buddha, his Teaching (Dharma), and the order (*saṅgha*). The Minor Rock and Pillar Edicts reveal that Aśoka was a devoted Buddhist. Thus Aśoka's Dharma was clearly derived from Buddhism.

Aśoka's Support of the Buddhist Order

Although Aśoka had converted to Buddhism, he treated other religions fairly. Rock Edict XII states that he "gave alms (*dāna*) and honored (*pūjā*) both members of religious orders and the laity of all religious groups (*pārṣada*)."¹ In Rock Edict VII, he declared that he "wished members of all religions to live everywhere in his kingdom." In Pillar Edict VII, Aśoka noted that he had appointed ministers of Dharma to be responsible for affairs related to the Buddhist order. Other ministers of Dharma were responsible for the affairs of Brahmans, Ājīvikas, or Jainas (Nirgranthas).

Aśoka was fair in his treatment of all religions, but he was particularly devoted to Buddhism, as is illustrated by the inscriptions concerning his own life. Aśoka converted to Buddhism around the seventh year of his reign. According to the Minor Rock Edict from Rūpnāth, for the next two years he was not very devout in his practice, but then for a period of more than a year he "drew near to the order" (*saṅghah upetah*) and practiced assiduously. The phrase "drew near to the order" probably indicated that Aśoka was affiliated with the Buddhist order and performed the same practices as a monk. According to Rock Edict VIII, Aśoka went to "*sambodhi*" (probably the *bodhi*-tree at Buddhagayā) in the tenth year of his reign. The Nigālisāgar Pillar Edict recorded that in the fourteenth year of his reign, Aśoka had a *stūpa* dedicated to the past Buddha Konākamana repaired and then personally made offerings at it. The Lumbinī Pillar Edict recorded that sometime after the twentieth year of his reign, Aśoka traveled to the Buddha's birthplace and personally made offerings there. He then had a stone pillar set up and reduced the taxes of the people in that area. The edicts at Sāñcī, Sārnāth, and Kauśāmbī all warned against schisms in the order and declared that any monk or nun who tried to cause a schism would be defrocked. Warnings against schisms were included in the Minor Rock Edicts as well.

In the Bairāṭ Edict, Aśoka paid honor to the order and then declared

that he respected (*gaurava*) and put his faith (*prasāda*) in the Three Jewels. He then stated that all of the Buddha's teachings were good, but that certain doctrines (*dharmaṃpariyāya*) were particularly useful in ensuring that Buddhism would endure for a long time. The names of the following seven texts were then listed.

1. *Vinayasamukase* (The Superior Teaching of the *Vinaya*; *Vinaya*, vol. 1, p. 7ff.)
2. *Aliyavasāni* (Noble Lineage; *AN*, IV:28, vol. 2, p. 27)
3. *Anāgata-bhayāni* (Dangers of the Future; *AN*, V, vol. 3, p. 100f.)
4. *Munigāthā* (Verses on Recluses; *Suttanipāta*, vv. 207–221)
5. *Moneyasūte* (*Sūtra* on the Practice of Silence, *Suttanipāta*, vv. 679–723)
6. *Upatisapasine* (Upatissa's Question, *Suttanipāta*, vv. 955–975)
7. *Lāghulovāda* (The Exhortation to Rāhula, *MN*, no. 61)

In order that the correct teaching might long endure, monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen were to listen to these works frequently and reflect on their contents.

The only edict concerning *stūpas* relates how Aśoka repaired a *stūpa* belonging to the past Buddha Konākamana (Konakamuni). However, in literary sources such as the *A-yü-wang ching* (*T* 2043, *Aśokarājasūtra?*) descriptions are found of how Aśoka made offerings to the Buddha's relics. In addition, Aśoka is said to have ordered 84,000 *stūpas* built throughout the realm and to have benefited many people. At the urging of Upagupta, Aśoka embarked on a series of pilgrimages to pay homage at Buddhist sites, including Lumbinī, the Deer Park at Sārnāth, Budhagayā, and Kuśinagara. At many of these sites he had *stūpas* constructed. *Stūpas* were also built for two of the Buddha's most important disciples, Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana. Later, when the Chinese pilgrims Fa-hsien and Hsüan-tsang traveled through India, they reported that many of these *stūpas* still remained. In more recent times, archeologists have excavated and studied many *stūpas* and discovered that the oldest parts of the *stūpas* often date back to Aśoka's time, indicating the accuracy of these records.

Because Aśoka was a fervent convert to Buddhism and strove to propagate it, he was praised and called "Dharma Aśoka." The ideology of Dharma propagated by Aśoka included many lofty ideals. Unfortunately, how extensively it spread among the people and how deeply it was understood by them remains unclear. Aśoka greatly aided the Buddhist order, recognizing that it contained people who put the Dharma

into practice. However, as the order became wealthy, the discipline of those in it may well have begun to decline. Large gifts to the order became burdensome to the nation's economy.

According to the *A-yü-wang ching* and other sources, when Aśoka was old, his ministers and the prince acted against Aśoka and forbade any gifts to the order. In the end, Aśoka was allowed to give the order only half a myrobalan (*āmalaka*) fruit, which he held in the palm of his hand. This legend indicates that Aśoka's career probably declined at the end of his life. In fact, the Mauryan empire lost much of its power and disappeared shortly after Aśoka's death. Yet Aśoka's Dharma cannot be judged as being without value because of the fate of his empire. Rather, his Dharma must be judged on its own merits.